

Christmas Brings Salvation

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[0 : 0 0] Well good afternoon everyone. Can I add my welcome to Ian's earlier? I'm Jonathan, Minister of the Church and welcome to you if you're here in person but also welcome to you if you're watching us on the live stream. I can say that these last three Sundays have been really strange in that we've only been able to have 20 people maximum in church but next Sunday we're looking forward to welcoming more people. So next Sunday we should be back up to the 50 limit but we're having two carol services next Sunday afternoon 4 p.m and then 7 p.m so we can fit at least 100 people in the building in the in the day so that we can celebrate Christmas together. So you may have seen the publicity on the way in on the door and you can pick up these flyers and hand them out to your friends. Also if you're watching on the live stream you can follow any of our social media platforms and you get these invitations which are easy to send as an invite to people to invite them along to our Christmas carol services next Sunday. So to encourage us all to do that think of who we can invite and to send them a message or give them a flyer. And can I also say I'm conscious that this has not been an easy time for so many and we've actually missed seeing people physical people in church and I know some of you are watching at home and you've been watching at home for a long long time and so I'd just like to take this opportunity to say that we we love you and we miss you and we do look forward to being back together again as a big church family because we're a big growing church and so we're grateful to God for that and it's good to meet together and so we look forward to the day when we don't have to be stuck in various parts of the city or even the world to worship together as God's people.

Okay we're going to look at Zechariah's song that David read for us so if you have a service sheet or if you have the the on your phone you can follow there's a slide with the points for our talk this afternoon and you might find it helpful to look at those points and follow as we go through. But let me pray and we'll ask for God's help as we come to study his word together. Let's pray.

Our gracious and loving God we thank you that you're the God who speaks to us because you are a relational God and you're the God who has come to us in the person of your son Jesus Christ so that we might know you and be part of your family. And so we pray this afternoon that as we study your word together we ask that the message of Christmas, the good news of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ would impact each and every one of us in a new and fresh way. For we pray in Jesus name. Amen.

Okay well this is Advent, the Advent season and Advent is a season of expectant waiting. And so this Christmas I would say that the world is waiting. Waiting it seems to be saved from COVID-19, the pandemic that nobody expected but that we are living through. 2020 has been a dark year physically, mentally, emotionally and financially. And so many people have lost lives, health, loved ones, mental well-being, jobs, security and we're wondering when all of this is going to end.

We're waiting and we're hoping. Waiting expectantly and hoping some vaccine will save us and will bring some light into our darkness. So last month when the first promising signs from the COVID vaccine trials emerged, the metaphor of light in darkness was used. So Jonathan Van Tam, the deputy chief medical officer for England said this. He said this to me is like a train journey where you're standing on the station, it's wet, windy, it's horrible and two miles down the tracks two lights appear and it's the train.

[4 : 03] And it's a long way off. We're at that point at the moment. So his job was to proclaim salvation. Salvation is coming, promising that whilst we're in the darkness right now, we can see the light.

The light is coming. And it does seem the light is getting closer as the vaccine program, in fact, will be rolled out in the coming week. And so this metaphor of light shining into darkness offers us some hope in our current crisis. But this metaphor, light and darkness, is actually at the very heart of the Christmas message. And so we began our worship today with some words from the prophet Isaiah in the Bible from chapter 9. Isaiah says the people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. And so Isaiah is saying the dawning of the light would save people in darkness. And it's a prophecy, of course, that is supremely fulfilled in Jesus Christ. And that's what we see from today's Bible reading in Luke chapter 1.

Zechariah concludes his song with these words, 78 and 79. He says, the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death to guide our feet into the path of peace. And my friends, that is why the message of Christmas could not be more relevant for our lives. Because Jesus coming isn't just some once upon a time story, but is our modern world's best hope. Because we know that all is not well in the world. We know that there is darkness. And we know that all is not well with our lives because we know there is a darkness inside of us. And if we're honest to admit it, then we know we need Christmas. We know we need Jesus Christ to come and sort out this world and sort out our lives. And so it is into this weary world of darkness that Jesus Christ came to save, giving light to humanity as we sit in darkness under the shadow of death. And so we're going to listen to Zechariah's song in Luke's Christmas playlist, because Zechariah's message is clear. Christmas brings salvation. Christmas brings salvation. We see that verse 69, verse 71, and verse 77. And so our three points this afternoon quite simply are how salvation comes, why salvation matters, and what salvation does. First of all, how salvation comes.

It comes through God's promised Savior. And so we need to just look back a bit and look to see how Zechariah came to sing about salvation. Because it seems that he didn't get it at first. Zechariah was a priest of God, but he had failed to take what God said to him seriously. And that is like so many people today. We just fail to listen to God and hear what he says, when what he says is for our own good and benefit. And so for Zechariah, an angel of the Lord appeared to him and said that he and his wife would have a son. And he was to be called John. And so John, John the Baptist, would prepare people for the coming of the Lord, meaning Jesus. But Zechariah didn't believe this because he was old and his wife Elizabeth was old, so he thought it was impossible that she could ever have a baby. And so he was rebuked for failing to believe what God said would happen, for failing to believe that God would indeed fill his promises. And so he was struck dumb. Zechariah couldn't speak for the duration of Elizabeth's pregnancy. So that's a long time not being able to speak. Maybe Elizabeth was glad, I don't know.

But it's only when John was born that Zechariah wrote on the tablet his name is John. That's when his mouth was opened and God enabled him to speak again. And so just imagine this length of time while he was struck dumb was a good time for him to think about God's salvation, to think about what the angel had said to him. And so when God enables him to speak again, he sings about the salvation in this song before us today. So verse 67 says his father Zechariah, that's John's father, was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied. And so this is a song not just about Zechariah's child, John, but it's about God's promised Savior. So it's come to be known as the Benedictus from the opening word in the Latin translation. And it means praise be. And that is the substance of the whole song, and especially the opening lines. So verse 68. Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he said through his holy prophets of long ago, salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us, to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham. So Zechariah is praising the Lord, the God of Israel. Why? Well, because he has come to his people, verse 68. And that coming, God coming, is mentioned again in verse 78, where we read the rising son will come to us from heaven. And it means God has visited. And we know what it means to visit someone, because that's the very thing that none of us can do right now, is go and visit anyone, and nobody can come and visit us either. But I think the government will allow us to visit at Christmas time. So when we visit someone, we visit them because we care about them and we want to be with them. And that's the kind of visitation, the kind of coming to that's in view here, except it's God who does the visiting. And that is the message at its heart, the message of Christmas. God has come to visit us. And so we need God, and we need God to come and visit us so that we can be saved. And that's what Zechariah is singing about.

[10:51] And so he says in verse 69, he has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he said through his holy prophets of long ago. And so the horn was a symbol of strength.

Ewan sang about it in one of the Psalms earlier. And so God is really fulfilling his promises to send a mighty Savior to send the Messiah King. God raised him up from the family line of David.

And so the coming of Jesus Christ into this world wasn't just something that happened without any forewarning, but the coming of Jesus is the fulfillment of all that God had said through the prophets. And that's why Zechariah sings, verse 72, that God will show mercy to our ancestors and will remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham. And so God made a covenant that is a solemn agreement into which God chose to enter. And God promised Abraham that from his offspring, from his family, his children, then a descendant would come and would bring blessing to all people of the world, to all nations. And so when Zechariah sings, God will remember his holy covenant. He doesn't mean that God somehow forgot what he was going to do or forgot what he had promised.

No, it means that now is the time that God will act upon and do exactly what he had promised to do. And so the salvation plan of God is being rolled out as Zechariah sings it, as John is born, as John then points to Jesus coming. And so just notice that the initiative in all of this is God's. The initiative in salvation is God's. So he has come to his people. He has raised us a horn of salvation. And he said through his holy prophets. So Zechariah is praising God for what God is doing. God is doing it. God has intervened in history by stepping into this world, like he said, in order to save. That's Christmas.

And what God is doing at Christmas is all centered upon the person and work of Jesus Christ, his promised savior. And so that's the first thing we need to get if we are going to understand Christmas.

[13 : 25] Christmas is the story of God coming to save you and me. Of God coming to save us. And that indicates, one, that we need saving. And two, we can't save ourselves. Because God is the one who does it through his promised savior, Jesus. And so if you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, then you might be asking, well, why do I need to be saved? Or what do I need to be saved from?

Well, that takes us to our second point. So first of all, first point, how salvation comes. It comes through God's promised savior. Second point, why salvation matters. Well, it matters because we're in slavery to our enemies. So why do we need salvation? It's because we are enslaved to our enemies. And so we need to be redeemed and set free. So just look at what Zechariah says, verse 68 again. He says, praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. And then verse 71, we need, it says, salvation from our enemies. And then again, verse 74 and 75, see why God has visited us. It is to rescue us from the hand of our enemies. And so this word redeemed that Zechariah mentions, it's connected with salvation throughout the Bible. And it means paying the price to regain something that would otherwise be lost. And so redemption speaks about deliverance or rescue, but at a cost. And so in the Bible, the central picture of redemption is the salvation that God accomplished for his people Israel when he rescued them from their slavery in Egypt, in the Exodus.

So the Israelites were slaves in Egypt in bondage to their enemies, and they needed to be set free. And so God, the Redeemer, in his mighty power, redeemed his people from their slavery. And so when Zechariah uses the word redeemed here, he's echoing God's saving work in the past so that he can explain God's saving work in the present. Now, of course, Zechariah is singing about a deeper problem than just physical enemies here. One that goes further back than the Exodus, because the oath that God swore to Abraham to rescue us from our enemies actually predates the Exodus. So it's not just human enemies here, human powers that come and go. It's not political enemies of God's people that he's talking about. So he's talking about a problem that's plagued the human race from the very, very start, from the beginning, because he's referring to the enemies of all people, enemies that cause all humanity to fear. And so the enemies he speaks of are sin and death. And both are mentioned in this song.

So see verse 77. We need the forgiveness of our sins. And then see verse 79. We're living in the shadow of death, sin and death. And they're connected because death is the consequence of sin. So death entered into the world because of sin. And it can be traced away back to the beginning when the first humans, Adam and Eve, rebelled against God in the Garden of Eden. They were helped by the very first enemy, Satan or the devil. So the Lord God warned them that disobedience to his commands would mean death.

And he said, this is from Genesis chapter 2 verse 17, you are free to eat from any tree in the garden, but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. For when you eat from it, you will certainly die. And so sin is the cause of death. So since sin entered the world, death has reigned, the apostle Paul says. Or he says the wages of sin is death. And so that's why Zechariah sings about God coming to rescue us from the hand of our enemies. Now when it comes to sin, most people don't see sin as being that much of a big deal, especially if we don't hurt anyone or harm anyone in the process of our own sin. And so the expressive individualism of our culture tells us that we are free to do whatever we want to do whenever we want to do it. But the message of Christmas tells us that we are not as free as human beings as we would like to think we are, but that we are actually enslaved to sin.

[18 : 38] We are sinful by nature, we're natural born sinners, as well as being sinful by choice, by what we choose to do. And so even if we believe we've got freedom to live as we want to live, it is basically the kind of freedom that an inmate has in a prison. Yes, the inmate might be able to go around and do certain things, but at the end of the day they are still trapped, they're still locked up. Because the perceived freedom that we think we have can actually just be a slavery to bad habits or to destructive behavior. So what we think we're in control of, we might think we're in control of our anger or our speech or envy or various addictions, alcohol, drugs, sex, work. We might think we are in control of all of these things, but these things can actually be controlling us. We're enslaved to them and we can't break free. And so true freedom only comes not by deciding what's right for me, but by listening to our loving creator God who knows what is best for our lives. And so if we're in slavery to sin, then it's really a suicidal action and it will destroy us. And that's why salvation matters, because sin leads to death and sin is humanity's biggest problem. It separates us from God.

So that's sin. But death also is something that fills us with fear, because it casts its shadow over our lives, because we can't escape death's clutches. Death robs us of the people we love.

The coronavirus pandemic has forced us to see that death is an enemy that is, we just can't overpower it, no matter how hard we try. And so sin is like this deadly virus that infects us all and results in death.

But not just physical death. Our sin leads to spiritual death and separation from God forever in hell. And when you think about it, hell is the ultimate lockdown, because it never ends.

And that is why salvation matters. It matters because we're enslaved to our enemies, sin and death, and we're powerless, helpless to do anything about it. And so we need a savior who can redeem us and who can rescue us. One who can save us from our bondage to sin and deliver us from death.

[21 : 20] And so see what happens when he does. Zechariah tells us, verse 74 and 75, to rescue us from the hand of our enemies and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. So the aim of our salvation is to live without fear, and we can when we know Jesus Christ, and to then live in holiness and righteousness before God all our days. Okay, so that's first how salvation comes. It's through God's promised Savior. Second, why salvation matters, because we're in slavery to our enemies. Thirdly, what salvation does, forgives our sins and defeats the darkness. So Zechariah sings about salvation. He sings to his son, John, probably holding him in his arms as he sings. And see what he says, verse 76 to 79, and you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High, for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace. So John, John the Baptist, his role was to proclaim that our sins can be forgiven by Jesus.

So salvation is a personal thing. Our sins, your sins, my sins need to be forgiven, and salvation is something that we can receive. Our sins can be forgiven, Zechariah sings, because of the tender mercy of our God. And so Christmas then is about God's mercy towards us in coming to us in Jesus to forgive our sins. And so our sin is this deadly virus that Jesus came to take by dying, in our place. So even though Jesus had never committed any sin, the Bible tells us that he became sin for us. He is the one who was infected with this deadly virus of sin so that we could be set free from it. So at the cross, Jesus paid the price and took the penalty that we deserve.

Remember the story of Jesus' death. When Jesus died, darkness came over the whole land, because the sun stopped shining. And so the darkness was a sign of God's judgment on sin, on human sin. But his judgment fell on Jesus Christ. Jesus was cast out into the darkness so that we need never be. And that's why Christmas brings salvation. And it points us to Jesus, just like John did, as the only hope that we have as human beings in life and in death. And so Zechariah's song is about salvation at a personal level. We all need Jesus to forgive our sins. So let's go to him and make sure we are forgiven. But Zechariah is also singing about salvation at a cosmic level. Because when we are saved, he says that we will be taken into the path of peace. That he, God, when he saves us, will guide our feet into the path of peace.

And this is surely the ultimate peace, shalom, that the Old Testament speaks about. That this is the end of darkness. This is the end of the brokenness of our world. This is the coming together of God's perfect harmony, of God's restoration of all things. That's what God will bring in the future. And we know this because the rising sun, verse 78, that's Jesus. Jesus is the rising sun who has come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death. And so Jesus has visited us to redeem and save us from our enemies. And so just as the first light of dawn indicates an end to the darkness of night, so too in the coming of Jesus on that first Christmas, the rising sun comes, has come, and assures us that the darkness will be gone forever. I guess most of us have energy-saving light bulbs in our homes. They're the most frustrating lights ever. You switch them on and then it takes ages for them actually to light up. Because when they're switched on, they do dispel the darkness and the light is there and the darkness begins to go, but it's only after a while that they shine out with their full brilliance. And that's really what Zechariah is singing about. The rising sun came in Jesus, shining out in this world. And so the light could be seen in his ministry. Remember, he healed the sick, he cast out demons, he controlled the weather, he forgave sin, he raised the dead. The light was dispelling the darkness in his ministry. And then it was shining brighter at the cross where he defeated

Satan's sin and death. And then his resurrection from the dead, guaranteeing that there's more light to come in the future. And so when Jesus Christ returns, then the brilliance of light will shine out forever and darkness will be no more. Why? Well, because the enemies of sin and death will be fully and finally defeated. And so everything that causes sin and death in this world now will be gone. All mourning, all crying, all pain, all suffering, all viruses. And isn't that the world that we all really want? We want it because we know this world is not as it should be. And we are not as we should be. And we are weary and we are frustrated and we long for everything to be restored and everything to be put right. No more darkness, only light.

[27 : 58] And so we get excited. And rightfully so at the brilliant breakthrough of a coronavirus vaccine because we hate to see people suffering and dying. And yet it doesn't matter how successful vaccines are, the death rate still remains at 100%. And so as good as it sounds, vaccines might hold off death for a while. But death is such a powerful enemy that it will defeat us one day, whether through COVID or cancer or car crash or something else altogether. We might slow death down.

We might hold death off. But one day we will die. And that is why the message of Christmas, the message of Jesus, taps into the deepest longings in all of our hearts.

And so whether you're here today and you call yourself a Christian or not, Christianity gives the salvation that we are desperate for, even if we didn't realize it.

And so perhaps you are skeptical about Christianity, that you've got your doubts and you've got your questions. But then when you hear Zechariah's song, then surely it makes you wish that Christianity is true.

Because this is the world we all want. And there is no other certain and sure hope for our world than the hope that comes to us in Jesus Christ. And so the invitation of Christmas is to stop sitting in the darkness of sin and to step out of the shadow of death. And the hope of Christmas is that the best is yet to come. And so that means we should enter into God's salvation right now.

[29 : 45] We should feel the warmth of his light and we should let him guide us in the path of peace towards ultimate peace and harmony and restoration.

And when we do that, when we accept Jesus Christ and we enter into God's salvation, then we can live our lives without fear, knowing that we are moving towards the day when the light of Jesus Christ will cast out the darkness forever. Because when we are united to Jesus Christ, when he returns, we will be raised with resurrection bodies fit for eternity. One day you'll get the body you've always wanted, the body you've dreamed for. It's coming. And so there is no better news this Christmas. God cares enough about our individual lives in this messed up world to come and visit us, to bring light in our darkness. And so whatever dark times we go through, and we will continue to go through them, we can still have hope in the midst of them. Because we know that the rising sun has come, the light has started to shine, and we have a God who joins us in our darkness. And we have a God who defeated darkness at the cross. And a God who promises that he will guide us out. And so what more could you ask for this Christmas than all that God offers in his salvation? Let's pray. We thank you, our great God, for all that you have revealed to us in your word. We thank you for the great news of Christmas, that with the coming of Jesus Christ, the rising sun, the light has come, and the light is getting brighter. And one day there will be no more darkness. And how we long for that in our world, and how we know we need it in our lives. And so we thank you that you have come to us, to give to us exactly what we need, that in your tender mercy, you give us the salvation we don't deserve through Jesus. And so we give you our praise and thanks. In Jesus' name, amen.